

# Peace in the pressure-cooker

*MUC Fellowship@10, 6 December 2025*

*Alison Sampson, reflecting on Matthew 3:1-12*

It was my first Sunday here at MUC. After the service, a person came up to me looking rather anxious. ‘I understand you’re a Baptist,’ they said. I confirmed that this is indeed the case. ‘Well,’ they said, ‘it may interest you to know that some people here believe in science.’ I suddenly realised why they looked so worried.

If you pay any attention to Baptists – not that I assume you do – you will know that some believe in a literal six-day creation while others, including my father, study and teach evolution. Some believe women shouldn’t speak in church, while others are like me (sorry not sorry). Some fight for white supremacy, while others lead the ongoing civil rights struggle. Some preach a God of war, while others place their trust in a God of peace and will put their bodies on the line with this conviction. There are many ways of being Baptist.

Similarly, the more I lean into MUC, the more I notice diversity. You may not be quite as extreme, but some here are hungry for formal liturgy, while others are practically allergic to it. Some are thrilled by evolution, while others praise God’s careful handiwork. Some trust in a literal resurrection, while others find it a powerful story. Some pray without ceasing, while others find such conversation far beyond the realms of reality.

The labels you use to describe yourselves are also diverse. Traditional, progressive, agnostic. Methodist, Presbyterian, Congregational, even Uniting! Fellowship, Family, Café, Emerging, not to mention all the churches which have flowed into becoming MUC. On and on it goes, each label implying to a greater or lesser extent a tribe, an identity, a politics, a constellation of beliefs, and a culture.

This is nothing new. In Jesus’ day, there were multiple Jewish groups and identities. In today’s text, we hear of two dominant groups: the Sadducees and the Pharisees, while John himself is often linked to the Essenes. These identities were all Jewish. Even so, these groups had different scriptures, different theologies, different politics, different approaches to life and different understandings of death. Each scorned the others’ beliefs, the

others' emphases, the others' politics. Yet both Pharisees and Sadducees come to the river for or maybe against John's baptism. We don't know for sure; the Greek preposition can mean either; it simply indicates things in relationship. Whatever their reason, these religious leaders turn up.

Notice this: John doesn't care about their identities. He doesn't grill them on their beliefs. He doesn't check which tribe they belong to or give a fig about their political affiliations. Instead, he's only interested in one thing: whether their lives show evidence of being aligned with Christ.

'Don't presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor,"' he warns. 'I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.' Then he goes on to say that he is simply baptising with water, but that one will come after him who will baptise people in holy and fiery spirit, winnowing all the rubbish from their lives.

It turns out that the ritual of baptism in water isn't the point; it's only the beginning. Being a child of Abraham isn't the point, since God can raise up children from anything. And being a Sadducee or a Pharisee or, dare I say, a Baptist or a Presbyterian or a Methodist, or a biblical literalist or a poststructuralist or anything else isn't the point, either. In fact, it seems these labels can get in the way of faith, particularly when they're associated with religious authority.

We see this in how John rages at the religious leaders. 'You brood of vipers!' he roars. 'Bear fruit worthy of repentance!' His harsh words suggest that, for all their piety and whatever they believe, these religious leaders are in fact dangerous to be around. They're like poisonous snakes who lash out and hurt people, spewing toxicity everywhere.

John knows scripture. So he knows that, in God's new creation, 'The breastfed babe shall play over the hole of the tiger snake, and the toddler shall put its hand, unharmed, into the nest of the copperhead.' (Isaiah 11:8). In other words, when God's culture is near, the powerful will have checked their power. Predators will no longer be on the hunt. People will have changed so that the vulnerable thrive: 'for they will not hurt or destroy on my holy mountain.' (v 9). Sadly, however, John does not see this transformation in the religious leaders down by the river.

I wonder why? Perhaps because this transformation means recognising hard truths about ourselves, and about the world. It means giving things up, especially, for some of us, power and status. It means acknowledging we are

no better than anyone else, and prioritising the needs of the most vulnerable. And it means being willing to grow. Such change can be painful. You might even say it burns.

And yet, despite our diversity of labels, change is what most of us here have done. Indeed, most of us have gone through some process of disillusionment with, even deconstruction of, our faith. Things we once believed no longer seemed right or life-giving or compatible with the way of Christ. Perhaps we found ourselves reconsidering the role of women in the church; perhaps we could no longer accept certain limitations around sex and gender. Perhaps we saw that our convictions were causing harm and so we found ourselves revisiting them. Perhaps we were hurt by a religious leader and our childlike faith was shattered and re-formed. Perhaps we realised we were living by law not grace, and that we needed to adjust our priorities. Perhaps we noticed that labels can be unhelpful, and that the only thing that really matters is love. Whatever it was, we changed.

An authentic faith means change. Indeed, the word 'repent' literally means 'change yourselves.' Repentance is not about shame or depravity or even personal salvation; instead it's about aligning our lives with Christ. But this almost always means letting go of old stories, old assumptions and even, at times, other people if they cannot accept our transformation.

As John puts it, some things will be burned away. To be clear, John is not referring to hellfire. Like last week, hellfire is a theology read back into the text; it isn't in the text itself. Instead, John is describing the process of winnowing. It's removing the rubbish so the goodness can be found. This is not a scorched earth policy, but firestick farming. It's the cool fire which turns chaff into a layer of ash which loosens and feeds the soil. It's the healing fire which kills parasites and diseases so plants can grow strong. It's the germinating fire which cracks open hard seeds and allows new life to grow.

This is the fire which John points to, the holy fire which Jesus brings, the sacred flames which lead to good fruit. For Jesus is coming to burn away the toxic theologies, the harmful stories, the pernicious lies. Jesus is coming to burn away shame and rage and fear. Jesus is coming to burn away the internalised judgement and accusatory whispers which bubble up from within. He's coming to burn away any sense of unworthiness and futility and despair, and he's coming to burn away our striving, our grasping, our desperate need to prove ourselves holier than the hypocrites. Jesus is coming

to burn all our labels, and all the ways we limit ourselves and sort each other and erect fences between us. Jesus is coming to burn away these things and more: because he loves us, he's coming for the harvest, and there's a sweet, sweet kernel in each of us that he seeks.

This week, then, in a world which feeds off the clash of religious identities, I invite you to turn away from the labels. Turn away from judging others by doctrine, theology or culture. Turn away from overbearing institutions, fenced-off rites and rituals, and leaders who abuse their power. Turn, and find the path to the river flowing through the wilderness where there is little power and status but abundant spirit and grace. Practice hope, wage peace, radiate love, and may the Holy Harvester's refining fire burn all the chaff away. Ω